

SC DNR Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Advisory Committee
February 10, 2015
Donnelley Wildlife Management Area Lodge

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Chair Mike Hutchins, Vice-Chair Cleve Smith, Bobby Garmany, Stan Halliday, Sam Hiott, Stephen Thomas, Martha Herbert

MEMBER ABSENT:

John Gramling

STAFF PRESENT:

Emily Cope, Ken Prosser, Susan Johnson, Billy Dukes, Derrell Shipes, Sam Chappellear, Dean Harrigal, Christy Hand, Michael Hook, Ross Self, Lynn Quattro, Bill Post

Chair Hutchins called the meeting to order and the minutes of the November 12, 2014 meeting were approved as submitted.

Constituents Mike Hardee, Robert Fowler and Matt Johnson, introduced themselves, representing the Georgetown County Coalition and private landowners in the area. Mike Hardee is the contact member for the group. Elizabeth Willis, DNR Board Member, was also introduced.

CONSTITUENT COMMENTS:

Attendees from the Georgetown County Sportsmen's Coalition, who are long-time duck hunters, addressed a number of concerns regarding the downward spiral of duck hunting in the area and said they would like to see a waterfowl advisory committee formed again since the previous one was disbanded.

Coalition members expressed concern about the hiring of one new manager at Santee Coastal Reserve and Samworth WMA, stating that one person cannot possibly oversee both areas and managers are needed at both locations.

They reported this past year the fields in the Samworth area were not flooded in a timely manner, which resulted in the loss of public hunting opportunities. They would like to see the fields and dykes in the area prepared and ready for hunting when duck season opens.

Coalition members stated landowners in the Plantersville area who prepare fields for waterfowl hunting are experiencing extreme hunting pressure on their fields from daylight until dark every day, necessitating the need for more DNR law enforcement officers. They noted a law enforcement task force for the area would deter such activities as shooting prior to the legal time and individuals hunting without licenses. The group also expressed the need for educating youth interested in waterfowl hunting, especially in hunter safety.

The Coalition members said would like a response from the Committee addressing their concerns within 30 days.

Chair Hutchins reported when the Waterfowl Advisory Committee (WAC) and the Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Advisory Committee (WFFAC) were combined, three members from the WAC now serve on the WFFAC.

Emily Cope stated there are a lot of different species in which the WFFAC has responsibility. These species are rotated as topics on the meeting agendas and waterfowl is among them. The Aquatic Plant Management Plan update is listed on the agenda today as a waterfowl and fisheries issue. Ms. Cope encouraged the constituents to have conversations with the existing Advisory Committee Members while staff pursues the concerns they raised. She reiterated that three members from the WAC were included in the makeup of the WFFAC to retain the importance of waterfowl. Ms. Cope reported staff is aware of some of the issues raised and they have some of the same concerns. Staffing issues in the Upper Coastal Waterfowl Project have been an issue and the agency is still recovering from budget cuts several years ago, resulting in staff reductions. She noted there is no state appropriated money for any wildlife management activities.

Ms. Cope reported in the past three years, great strides have been made in staffing. Although the agency is not where they would like to be, they are working toward that goal. Staff recognizes the importance of these waterfowl areas not only to hunters, but also to neighboring landowners. Ms. Cope said staff will address the concerns presented by the Coalition and will let them know DNR's plan of action. She added a new manager was assigned to the Upper Coastal Waterfowl Area one week ago. Additionally, Sam Chapple, the former Region IV Coordinator is now the Senior Wildlife Biologist over DNR's Regions II, and IV and his former position has been filled by Dean Harrigal. Mr. Harrigal has been responsible for the management of Donnelley and Bear Island WMAs for many years and Ms. Cope said she was excited about the direction these recent staff changes will bring. She will also pass along their law enforcement related concerns. While a group of officers is currently in training, vacant positions can only be filled as the General Assembly approves salary funds and positions.

WFFAC member Sam Hiott stated he was the former Chair of the Waterfowl Advisory Committee and noted that consolidating the two committees was done in the best interests of what can be accomplished for the migratory bird population. He further stated from an economic and DNR staff standpoint, combining the two Committees was the best solution. Problems mentioned by the constituents were addressed by the former Waterfowl Advisory Committee. Mr. Hiott reported a discussion was held regarding creating more public hunting opportunities on wildlife management areas at the November WFFAC meeting.

Mr. Hiott said there were reasons for fields not being ready and those reasons have been discussed, which included reduced funding and staff reductions. Mr. Hiott stated it is a slow process and ideally it would be wonderful to have many more officers and biologists. He reiterated that the Committee will continue to address these issues.

Chair Hutchins announced Richard Morton from the Clemson office was ill and would not be able to provide the Clemson Forest Overview. This topic will be scheduled for a future meeting.

Chair Hutchins thanked Cleve Smith for his suggestion several years ago to create a DNR app, which is now live.

Chair Hutchins introduced Martha Herbert, who was recently appointed to the Committee.

WOOD STORK UPDATE:

Wildlife Biologist Christy Hand reported in 2014 the USFWS down-listed the federal status of the wood stork from “endangered” to “threatened.” However, they are still protected under the Endangered Species Act. Ms. Hand stated overall, 2014 was an excellent year for wood storks nesting in South Carolina. A total of 2,501 stork nests were counted statewide. The previous record was 2,057 in 2004.

Ms. Hand reported DNR biologists and volunteers monitor nesting success in several index colonies in 8 SC counties. An average of 2.2 chicks survived until they were old enough to fly (fledge) per nest in the colonies that were monitored. The federal recovery goal for wood storks is an average of 1.5 fledglings per nest.

Ms. Hand stated historically, wood storks used SC as a feeding area during the summer and fall after dispersing from nesting colonies in Florida and Georgia. Wood storks began to expand their nesting range into SC and NC after much of their habitat in southern Florida was altered or lost. In 1981, the first successfully nesting wood storks were documented in SC (11 nests). From 1994 until 2013, wood storks built between 712 and 2,057 nests annually in SC. Ms. Hand reported Southern Florida remains very important for storks during the winter and continues to support a portion of the population during the nesting season.

Ms. Hand stated ongoing projects include colony, aerial and ground surveys, individual nest monitoring, chick banding, and habitat management. DNR has asked the public to report sightings of banded wood storks and satellite transmitters are being used as well. Nine wood storks were outfitted with transmitters at the Washo Reserve in SC last year. Their travels are on the Wildlife Tracking website and on the Washo Wood Storks Facebook page.

Emily Cope stated DNR is very fortunate to have Christy Hand on board in the Statewide Projects Section. She said Christy deserves a lot of credit for building partnerships and creating relationships with private landowners and fostering their interest in the conservation of wood storks. Derrell Shipes commended Christy on the challenge of putting a positive spin on threatened and endangered species, something that is not easily accomplished. He also noted Christy has been tasked with work regarding the Black Rail, which is a very secretive marsh bird.

STURGEON MONITORING:

Freshwater Fisheries Biologist Bill Post reported Shortnose sturgeon and Atlantic sturgeon occur throughout rivers and estuaries along the Atlantic Coast. Past telemetry studies have focused on single rivers or basin specific projects. Beginning in 2010, a new multi-state telemetry program funded by the National Marine Fisheries Service was initiated to determine use of summer, winter, spawning, and critical habitats in Georgia, South Carolina, and North Carolina. By having all states working together, the degree of interbasin transfer could also be discerned and analyzed. Almost 600 ultrasonic receivers were placed in most major coastal river systems, connecting waterways, and near-shore areas. Receivers were generally deployed from the river mouth to potential spawning areas or the first barrier in the system. Additionally, fellow researchers in the Northeastern states (Virginia to Connecticut) provided receiver coverage along the entire Atlantic coast with relatively few gaps.

Mr. Post stated annual movement patterns of tagged sturgeon recorded by the receivers during the last 4 years has not only filled in some missing data gaps, but has dramatically altered conventional wisdom for both species. Involved researchers continue to share tagging and receiver download data allowing coast-wide movements to be better understood.

DRAFT AQUATIC PLANT MANAGEMENT RECOMMENDATIONS:

Michael Hook, Field Supervisor for DNR's Aquatic Nuisance Species Program (ANS), gave a brief synopsis of the history of the Aquatic Plant Management Council (APMC) and presented some notable portions of the proposed 2015 Aquatic Plant Management Plan. He noted that the Council was established in 1980 and was further strengthened in 1990 when Gov. Carol Campbell signed into law the bill creating the APMC and the Aquatic Plant Management Program. Originally the APMC was made up of 9 separate agencies and 1 representative from the Governor's office. DNR has three representatives on the Council: Chris Page, who is the Chairman, Bob Perry and Marc Cribb.

Mr. Hook reported the Council is tasked with establishing aquatic plant management policies and approving all aquatic plant management plans. The ANS Program develops an annual Aquatic Plant Management Plan which is presented to the Council each year. The Council reviews and approves the annual draft plan proposed by the ANS Program and the draft plan is released for public comment. The Council then reviews the public comments, amends the plan, and approves it. The plan is approximately 230 pages and covers approximately 50 to 60 water bodies each year. Mr. Hook noted the target date for completion of the 2015 draft plan is February 18th.

Mr. Hook stated there are some water bodies that do not change much from year to year. Examples include the Goose Creek Reservoir, Cooper River, Wood Stork Project ponds, and Lake Murray. Others change drastically each year, including Joint Base Charleston, the Phragmites Taskforce Initiative in the ACE Basin, and the Santee Cooper Lakes.

In 2010, Mr. Hook reported there was 1,250 acres of hydrilla in the Santee Cooper lakes system. In 2011 the number was 3,600 acres, in 2013 it was 7,200 acres, and in 2014, it was 1,050 acres. The Council adopted an adaptive stocking strategy to regain control of the hydrilla and stocked 25 sterile grass carp for each acre of hydrilla in the system, plus 10 sterile grass carp for each acre of other palatable vegetation. Mr. Hook noted the system currently contains approximately 93,000 grass carp. At this time, there are no acreage figures for hydrilla in the system. At the last Council meeting, Santee Cooper mentioned they were considering stocking 20,000 additional carp. Without any vegetation acreage figures, they are unable to make any grass carp stocking proposals at this time.

Committee Member Thomas made a motion that a select member of the Committee work with Emily Cope and her staff regarding the aquatic plant issues, particularly in the Santee Cooper System area. Chair Hutchins asked if another Committee Member would be interested in working with Mr. Thomas and DNR staff. Committee Member Garmany volunteered. A second was received to the motion and unanimously approved. Committee Member Hiott stated he would be glad to assist if needed.

LEGISLATIVE UPDATE:

Emily Cope reported there has been a lot of interest in the turkey legislation, which was carried over from the 2014 session. The bill would allow a statewide season of March 20 to May 5; the Saturday prior to March 20 would be a statewide youth day; and a statewide bag limit of 3 plus one extra taken by archery. The bill has been introduced in the House and Senate. Mrs. Cope feels optimistic it will pass this session.

There has also been a lot of interest in deer management, to include a comprehensive deer tagging program. Ms. Cope noted a buck limit and tagging system are needed to insure accountability. She

feels legislation is forthcoming in the form of a deer quota program for antlered and antlerless deer. For properties enrolled in the current ADQP program, DNR will issue a permit for a set number of tags for both antlered and antlerless deer based on that specific property. For those not hunting on ADQP properties, individual hunters will be issued up to 4 antlerless and 4 antlered individual tags at a cost of \$15.00.

DNR's budget proposal has received support from the House subcommittee to include \$118,000 for the Endangered Species Program. The budget also includes funds for the hatchery and state lakes programs in Freshwater Fisheries.

Ms. Cope reported staff has also been approached by members of the General Assembly regarding putting funds into the wildlife management area program. These funds would be derived from a revenue process. Ms. Cope welcomed ideas from Committee Members in developing a proposal for these funds.

There will also be clean-up legislation introduced regarding grass carp stocking, WMA regulations, state lakes regulations and compliance with diadromous fish issues.

There was no old and/or new business.

ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEMBER COMMENTS:

Mr. Garmany thanked Mike Hardee and his group for attending the meeting. He noted the coastal plain has been a little behind the Upstate as far as education of youth hunters, such as skeet clubs in public high schools. He feels these programs will help in educating youth, particularly in the ballistics of guns.

Mr. Hiott noted the concerns voiced by Mr. Hardee have been and are being addressed. He thanked Mr. Hardee for his feedback and reported the Committee and DNR staff will continue working through this slow process.

Mr. Thomas stated he is a river hunter himself and that is why he serves on the Committee. He said he represents the concerns of the constituents at every meeting he attends.

Ms. Herbert commented that respect and responsibility cannot be legislated and we have gotten away from those things. It appears young people today cannot be convinced that it is not just about "me" and they do not want to hear they cannot shoot 200 yards and kill a duck. She is not sure how it can be fixed, but she feels it goes back to respect and responsibility. Ms. Herbert stated perhaps citizen committees and volunteers working with WFF staff might be a solution.

DATE, TIME AND PLACE OF NEXT MEETING:

Tuesday, May 12, Columbia DNR Office.

Chair Hutchins thanked the constituents for attending and DNR Board Member, Elizabeth Willis. He also thanked Sam Hiott and Bobby Garmany for providing lunch. The meeting was adjourned followed by lunch and a tour of Donnelley WMA, hosted by Dean Harrigal.